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SUBJECT: LILLE INSTITUTE CONCEIVED TO PROMULGATE MODERATE
ISLAM AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

¶1. (SBU) Summary: APP Lille Consul and Embassy Poloff called November 29 on Mohamed Bechari, Chairman of the recently inaugurated Institut Avicenne des Sciences Humaines (IASH), a multi-disciplinary private educational establishment devoted to the study of Islamic theology, history and the Arabic language. Mr. Bechari discussed his vision of an establishment that would provide an alternative, moderate view of Islam to Muslims living in France and French society at large. He also hoped the IASH would serve as an interfaith forum for the exchange of ideas and perspectives. APP Consul emphasized our interest in working with moderate Islamic institutions, discussed the possibility of Embassy speakers addressing the students and faculty of IASH, and highlighted the Embassy's International Visitor (IVLP) program as a means of promoting ongoing dialogue. End Summary

¶2. (SBU) APP Lille Consul and Embassy Poloff called on Mohamed Bechari, Chairman of the newly inaugurated Institut Avicenne des Sciences Humaines (IASH), on November 29. After a tour of the recently renovated physical plant, Mr. Bechari expressed his hope that the institute would represent and reinforce a more moderate Islam, able to live peacefully among other religious faiths in France's multicultural society. According to Bechari, "(The Institute) will represent the historical richness of humanistic Arab thought, before the large ideological ditch of modern times."

¶3. (SBU) To that end, Bechari explained that the IASH would provide professional training for imams and chaplains as well as social science curricula, including programs in Arabic, Muslim civilization, and sociology. "The first post-9/11 casualty was the Muslim faith," said Bechari. "Islam is a religion of peace...We must cease proclaiming meaningless expressions, like 'the clash of civilizations' and 'intercultural dialogue', which lead us down blind alleys if they are not clarified and reinforced through action." The IASH has received assistance from the city of Lille and lists among its "foreign partners" institutions in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Senegal, Tunisia, Turkey, and Yemen.

¶4. (SBU) The IASH's moderate agenda has won it the support of some in the larger religious community. Monsignor Defois, Catholic Bishop of Lille and member of the institute's advisory committee, commented during the inauguration ceremony that "Islam is a part of our European roots. I hope that we explore those roots together in order to establish a shared philosophical foundation."

¶5. (SBU) At the time of its inauguration in late November, the IASH had 80 enrolled students, many of whom were already college educated and planned to undertake their studies in addition to continuing full-time jobs. APP Lille Consul told Bechari that the USG was eager to maintain contact, mentioning specifically the prospect of Embassy speakers addressing IASH faculty and students and describing the Embassy's International Visitor program as an exchange option. Bechari thanked the Consul and added that he would like to reciprocate, inviting Americans to spend time with

the Muslim community he planned to establish at IASH.

¶6. (SBU) Comment and bio note: Bechari, born in 1967 in Oujda, Morocco, is the President of the Federation of the Muslims of France (FNMF), a prominent national group affiliated with Morocco. In September of 2004, Bechari, then also serving as a Vice-President of the French Council of Muslim Worship (CFCM), France's most prominent national Muslim group, had controversial meetings with the Lebanese Shiite spiritual leader of Hezbollah, Sheik Fadlallah, and the former leader of the Islamic Salvation Front, Algerian Islamist Abassi Madani. The second meeting, in particular, "shocked" the CFCM chairman and rector of the Grand Mosque of Paris, Dalil Boubakeur, revealing the tensions among the various Muslim groups within the CFCM and highlighting the difficulty that any single entity has in representing the spectrum of France's five million plus Muslims.

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